

# **The Rise of Muscovy**

By

Jeffrey L. Neal

Senior Seminar: HST 499  
Professor Benedict Lowe  
Western Oregon University  
June 16, 2006

Readers  
Professor David Doellinger  
Professor John Rector

Copyright © Jeffrey L. Neal, 2006

Kievan Rus which was founded in 880 was made up of a loose knit alliance between small city states in what is today western Russia. The most powerful of these city states was Kiev. During the early thirteenth century the Mongol continued their march west until they conquered Kievan Rus in 1240. Although the Mongol did not occupy the Russian lands, the Kievan Rus period era was effectively over. The turmoil that followed the Mongol invasion allowed for Moscow, a previously weak and minor principality to rise out of the shadows and become a major political player. The goal of this paper is to examine how Moscow rose to power; this will be done by following the evolution of the Moscow princess attitudes towards their authority and right to rule, between the years 1325 until 1584.

To understand process of centralization in Moscow, several interpretations have arisen. Several historians have examined the Mongols contributions to the Muscovite state, while others' interpretations viewed the Muscovites as rising to power in spite of the Mongols.

In recent years much scholarship has been directed towards the question of how the Mongols influenced the rise

of the Muscovite state. There has been three basic interpretation of the rise of Moscow. They are: complete denial of Mongol influence, recognition of Mongol influence, but gave the influence negative attributes, and attributed the rise of Moscow to the Mongol influence.

The first historians to interpret the Russian history during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth century moved the political domination of the Mongols over the Kievan Rus principalities into obscurity. Unfortunately this view lasted well into the twenty first century. As Nicholas V. Riasanovsky states, when examining Mongol rule over Kievan Rus historians have two avenues of interpretation: "the first denied all long range significance to the Mongol conquest of Russia, the second considered it lastingly important in terms of its destruction, burden, and pressure".<sup>1</sup> This unfortunate interpretation ran rampant throughout historians' works. As Valentine Tschebotarioff-Bill states the second phase of Russian development happened in spite of the Mongol oppression.<sup>2</sup> Charles Halperin further expands, and gives a reason why the Mongols contribution to the people of Kievan Rus was overlooked. The Russian political, social, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "Oriental Depotism and Russia", *Slavic Review*, Vol.22. No.4. (Dec., 1963) 648

<sup>2</sup> Valentine Tschebotarioff-Bill, "The Circular Frontier of Muscovy", *Russian Review*, Vol. 9, No.1. (Jan., 1950) 45.

moral level was so superior to the Mongols, that borrowing from them was unthinkable.<sup>3</sup>

The second type of interpretation can be seen in the historian Michael Cherniavsky's, 1959 work, "Khan or Basileus: An Aspect of Russian Mediaeval Political Theory." Cherniavsky sees the Mongol invasion and occupation of Russia as an interruption of Russian history.<sup>4</sup> The focuses of his article is on how the Mongol occupation of Russia changed "Russia's image of her ruler".<sup>5</sup> He proposes that the image of the Mongol Khan replaced the Byzantine emperor as their image of power. The way that Cherniavsky frames his article, cast the Mongols in a negative light. Cherniavsky states that he is going to "deal with only one aspect of the general problem of the Mongol Yoke and the changes in Russian society and life induced by it".<sup>6</sup>

Cherniavsky used a letter from Emperor John Cantacuzene to Grand Prince Simeon the Proud,<sup>7</sup> service books, Sophia chronicle, Nikon chronicle, trinity chronicle, and diplomatic correspondence. Cherniavsky chose these sources because they either dealt with direct

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles J. Halperin, "Russia in The Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1. (June. 1983) 239.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Cherniavsky, "Khan or Basileus: An Aspect of Russian Mediaeval Political Theory", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 20, No. 4. (Oct. -Dec., 1959): 459.

<sup>5</sup> Cherniavsky, 460.

<sup>6</sup> Cherniavsky, 459.

<sup>7</sup> Cherniavsky, 460.

interaction between the Mongols and the Russian, or addressed how the Russians worshiped the Tsar. The question that Cherniavsky asked from the sources he used was: how did the Russians perceive the power of the Tsar?

Cherniavsky's interpretation of the rise of the Muscovites does recognize that there was influence from both the Khan and the Basileus<sup>8</sup>. However Cherniavsky believes that the Basileus' influence resulted in positive qualities of future Tsar, and that Khan's influence resulted in negative qualities. Cherniavsky use Ivan IV to exemplify the contrasting influences. He says that Ivan IV (from the Khan) Killed by day (from the Basileus) and prayed by night.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately this interpretation of the Mongol conquest of Kievan Rus started to slowly erode during the 1960's. This changing interpretation can be seen in the works of historians Edward Louis Keenan, and Karl Wittfogel. They acknowledge that the people of Kievan Rus and Muscovy did borrow some institution from the Mongols, but do not deem this borrowing as a positive result for the Muscovites.

Karl A. Wittfogel's article "Russia And The East: A Comparison And Contrast" was published in 1963. He

---

<sup>8</sup> Cherniavsky uses the term Basileus, which refers to the emperor of Constantinople.

<sup>9</sup> Cherniavsky, 476.

addresses the question, how did the Princes of Moscow come to build an autocratic state. He believes that it is based on an Asiatic model borrowed from the Mongols. Wittfogel uses the Hydraulic approach, which was first used by Karl Marx, to explain how the building of dams, levees, and dikes impacted Asiatic societies.<sup>10</sup> As this indicates Wittfogel presents his paper in a Marxist light.<sup>11</sup> He stresses the importance of class stratification in Russian and Oriental societies.<sup>12</sup> Wittfogel also deems that the previous empirical methods used by historians do not fully comprehend the patterns of the "Orientalized" state and society.<sup>13</sup> He refers to these patterns to justify his reliance on Marxist theory.

Wittfogel uses the Nikon Chronicle, diplomatic correspondence, and the writings of Staden, who served under Ivan the IV as his primary sources. He asked three basic questions from the primary sources. How did the Mongol political institutions work, how did the Mongols govern the lands of Kievan Rus, and what was the interaction between the Russians and Mongol?

---

<sup>10</sup> Karl A. Wittfogel, "Russian and the East: A Comparison and Contrast." *Slavic Review* Vol. 22, No. 4. (Dec., 1963):631.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Wittfogel, 629.

<sup>13</sup> Wittfogel, 634.

Wittfogel article is meant to criticize the views of a fellow historian named Vasily Kliuchevsky. Kliuchevsky "did not equate the Muscovite and Oriental despotism, although he recognized important similarities between them."<sup>14</sup> To build up his argument, that Oriental despotism did happen in Russia, Wittfogel borrows ideas and interpretation from other historians to help substantiate his claim.<sup>15</sup>

Edward Louis Keenan wrote his article "Muscovy and Kazan: Some Introductory Remarks on the Patterns of Steppe Diplomacy" in 1967. As the title implies, Keenan focuses the majority of his writing on the patterns of steppe diplomacy. He uses patterns to help reevaluate the primary sources.<sup>16</sup> Keenan takes a very scientific approach to his work. He states: "we are so far from adequate understanding of many of these subjects that we cannot be squeamish about borrowing any applicable method from the faster-moving sciences."<sup>17</sup> Keenan's article is based on cross-referencing sources to build new historical data, which is quite different from what the other historian being examined did in their work. This made the questions that they asked of the sources very different.

---

<sup>14</sup> Wittfogel, 629.

<sup>15</sup> Like Marx, Bodin, Chaadaev, Kovalevsky, Max Weber, Dr. Spuler, Paul Miliukov.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Keenan, "Muscovy and the Kazan: Some Introductory Remarks on the Patterns of Steppe Diplomacy", *Slavic Review* Vol. 26, No. 4. (Dec., 1967): 548.

<sup>17</sup> Keenan, 548.

Keenan is primarily trying to expand the knowledge of the diplomatic relations between the different states that occupied the steppe during the turbulent Middle Ages. He is saying that the previous historians did not have access to the knowledge of the sources, because his "pattern" work has revealed distinctly new insight into the working of the diplomatic relations of the various states on the steppe. Keenan believes that the Muscovite state was able to gain dominance over the other principalities, because it did not challenge the steppe societies.<sup>18</sup> He makes the distinction that there was no need for Moscow to challenge the Mongols, because its goals were the opposite of the Mongols, the resulting autonomy allowed for Moscow's growth.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1980's and 1990's the full recognition of the Mongol influence in Muscovy was acknowledged: by the likes of Halperin, David Morgan, and Donald Ostrowski. Halperin looked at the political history of the Golden Horde's rule over Russia, and then examined how these political institutions of the Golden Horde had impacted the lives of the Russians citizens and princes. Halperin goes beyond just looking at how the Mongols influenced the Muscovites; he also explains why the Mongols were only viewed as

---

<sup>18</sup> Keenan, 557.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



destructive by the medieval chroniclers. He labels his explanation "the ideology of silence." Halperin outlines how the ideology of silence has affected the recording of the history of Kievan Rus during the Mongol Yoke, and the first few interpretations of the Mongol Yoke by medieval historians.

Halperin reinterprets the rise of Moscow by arguing that the Muscovite princes worked within the Mongol political system to help propel themselves to the top of Russian politics. The Muscovite princes used the Mongol tax system to help strengthen their position in Russia by exempting themselves from taxes and making the difference up by raising taxes on the rest of the population<sup>20</sup>. This method allowed them to increase their wealth and power, but avoid confrontation with the Khan. The Moscow Princes allied itself with the Golden Horde during the first half of the fourteenth century,, which encouraged the Mongols to direct raids against Moscow's enemies<sup>21</sup>. Once again this critical aspect of Muscovy and Mongol relationship is often left out of many chronicles and the first monographs written about the Mongols conquest of Kievan Rus. To

---

<sup>20</sup> Halperin, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Halperin, 79.

suggest that Moscow collaborated with the Mongols was unthinkable.

Halperin also states that the destructive power of the Mongols encouraged migration to Moscow because it was considered a safe place. Due to its alliance with the Golden Horde, many people went to Moscow<sup>22</sup>. During medieval times manpower was perhaps the greatest asset a principality could have, and the influx of population greatly strengthened Moscow. The Moscow princes were able to ally with the Golden Horde when it was strong and challenged the Horde when it weak, giving them great success in their attempt to gain greater autonomy and dominate the other Russian city-state.

David Morgan places more emphasis on the Mongols from the time Chingis Khan united the tribes in 1206 until the death of the last Yuan emperor in China in 1370. This focus on the Mongols themselves provides a very unique analysis. Morgan provided an explanation of how the Mongols developed their complex administration system by borrowing ideas from the Chinese and from the Arabs, then combining them to make them their own.

Morgan's sources are very elaborate, using Kievan Rus chronicles, firsthand accounts, recorded folklore, Chinese

---

<sup>22</sup> Halperin, 80.

court records, and Arabian records. His amount and type of sources used differed from the other historians, because he focused on all four kingdoms of the Khans and not just the Golden Horde. In particular his chapter on the "Nature and Institutions of the Mongol Empire" was incredibly helpful in understanding how the Mongols operated.<sup>23</sup>

Ostrowski methodology is not much different than the other historians, but he does not recognize his work as the truth. He understands that there is no way to be completely certain about the past. As he states, the sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth century are meager at best,<sup>24</sup> and "much of what I am arguing, therefore, is based on inference, deduction, and a degree of speculation."<sup>25</sup> This is a direct consequence of the Postmodern criticism of historical study, that the past is unknowable. Therefore Ostrowski is not claiming to be providing a concrete analysis of the past, but instead he acknowledges the problem facing historians<sup>26</sup> and presents an argument that is to the best of his ability.

The primary sources that Ostrowski relied on were diplomatic correspondence and administrative records.

---

<sup>23</sup> David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 84.

<sup>24</sup> Donald Ostrowski, "The Mongol Origins of Muscovite Political Institutions", *Slavic Review* Vol. 49, No. 4. (Winter, 1990): 526.

<sup>25</sup> Ostrowski, 526.

<sup>26</sup> Problems include gaps in historical records, inherent and intended biases in sources, and the multiple means of human language.

Ostrowski chose these sources, because he was writing a political history. The questions that Ostrowski asked of the primary sources are very prudent to his topic. He asks the same question from both the Muscovite and the Mongol sources: what type of political institutions did they use? He then takes this information and cross-references it to draw similarities between the two.

Even though many gains have been made toward understanding the full impact that the Mongol rule had on the rise of the Muscovy state, it can hardly be called complete. Historians have said little about how the Khan's absolute power changed and shaped the Moscow princes' view of power. The Mongols sent the Muscovites on their way to developing a true autocracy.

When the Mongol conquered Kievan Rus, they brought many new and foreign ideas and customs with them, possibly the most important was the idea of complete and absolute power. The Khans had complete power over their people; they were supreme and unchallenged rulers. This type of leadership was superior to the local power base of Kievan Rus. The Khan was able to force the Princes and Boyars to travel great distances to pay him tribute. Not only did they pay him tribute, they were forced to bow to the Mongols idols and to the Khan. This meant that they

completely submitted themselves to the Kahn, even at the expense of renouncing their Christian Faith.

This policy of the Mongols which required complete submission from the princes, created a new idea of absolute power for the people of Kievan Rus and Moscow in particular. This was not the only contribution that led the city of Moscow to gain prominence over the other cities of Kievan Rus, but the idea of absolute power was the foundation that the Muscovites needed to build their autocracy.

The fragmented political structure that existed in Kievan Rus and in Moscow can be seen in the early testaments of the Grand Princes of Moscow. These testaments were written by the Grand Princes and acted as will. To observe the evolution of the Moscow princes' perceived notion of power, this paper will examine the testaments from Ivan Kalita, Ivan III, and Ivan IV. The will of these leaders demonstrates the development of absolute power.

Ivan Kalita wrote his testament in 1339, Ivan III in 1503, and Ivan IV's in 1572. I chose Kalita's testament because it indicates how the grand princes traditionally viewed power. Ivan III's testament illustrates a significant change in how he viewed his role as grand prince. Ivan IV's testament is the final culmination of the

grand princes changing view of power. These testaments give an insight into how power was divided among the princes and how they viewed their role as Grand Prince.

Ivan Kalita's was grand prince of Moscow from 1328 until 1341<sup>27</sup>. He ruled during a period of transition for Muscovy. Under Kalita Moscow began to become a more prominent state. As his testament demonstrates the Moscow still suffered from a fragmented political structure. Ivan Kalita does not specify an heir to his throne. He divides his land holdings and titles between his three sons Seman, Ivan, and Andrey.<sup>28</sup> This creates three Moscow princes that all have a legitimate claim to the throne. Kalita also divided up the city revenues between his three sons and his princess.<sup>29</sup> His princess got the revenue from Osmnicheye, while his sons shared revenue from all the other cities.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most important resource in medieval time was man power. Kalita also dictated that his three sons would equally manage the enrolled people.

Ivan Kalita partitioned his titles, land holding, and resources equally to his three sons. This created a problem. The resources of Moscow are not being used in a

---

<sup>27</sup>Howes, Robert Craig. "The Testaments of the Grand Princes of Moscow" Cornell University, NY, 1967. pg 180.

<sup>28</sup>Howes, 182-183.

<sup>29</sup>Howes, 184.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

unified manner. Tax revenue and military power is going in three different directions. The fragmentation of this political system leads to a weak state, which in turn hampers the ambitions of the grand princes and the growth of Moscow.

Ivan III was grand prince of Moscow from 1462 until 1506.<sup>31</sup> By the end of his reign, the Mongols no longer had control over the Russian lands.<sup>32</sup> This allowed for him to start a rapid centralization of power in Moscow. Ivan III will demonstrates several changes in the idea of power held by the Muscovite princes. In the second paragraph of his will Ivan III specifies that his younger sons should obey their older brother, Vasilii in all things.<sup>33</sup> This statement by Ivan III creates a strict hierarchal system where the oldest son is the undisputed ruler, unlike Ivan Kalita, where his three sons where treated as near equals.

Ivan III clearly states that Vasilii gets all of Ivan III's grand principalities.<sup>34</sup> This means that Vasilii is granted all of the tax rights and the right to rule over the enrolled people.<sup>35</sup> This is in stark difference to what Ivan Kalita left in his will. Kalita divided the taxes and

---

<sup>31</sup> Howes, 267.

<sup>32</sup> The Mongol occupation of Russia ends in 1480.

<sup>33</sup> Howes, 269.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Howes, 270.

the rule of the enrolled people evenly between his three sons.

Vasiliy was given the right to exclusively coin money, and administrate justice.<sup>36</sup> These stipulations give Vasiliy complete control over the finances and the court system. Vasiliy's control over such important systems cements his role as the complete and dominate ruler.

Ivan III was also the first grand prince to justify his rule with divinity. He stated that God had given him his Principalities.<sup>37</sup> This justifies his and future grand princes absolute rule over the boyars and people.

Ivan III's decision to leave all of his power to his eldest son had important repercussion. It effectively created a stable line of secession, which in turn allowed for the grand princes to focus all the resources of Moscow in one direction, allowing them to expand their sphere of influence.

Ivan IV took the throne in 1547 and died on 1584.<sup>38</sup> His will shows the final progression of the changing ideals of power, when he blesses his Son Ivan I with the entire Russian Tsardom.<sup>39</sup> This shows that the Muscovite grand princes now view themselves as the ruler of all of Russian.

---

<sup>36</sup> Howes, 273.

<sup>37</sup> Howes, 269.

<sup>38</sup> Howes, 304.

<sup>39</sup> Howes, 314.



The term Tsar had traditionally been reserved for the Mongol Khan or the Emperor of Constantinople. The Muscovite princes now viewed themselves as all powerful much like the Khan and Emperor did.

Many historians have commented on how Moscow princes' created a centralized state, but few have mention why the princes' created a centralized state. I believe that the princes' idea of power evolved due to influence from the Khan's absolute power.

The testaments of Ivan Kalita, Ivan III, and Ivan IV show a clear change in the way that the Muscovite princes viewed the idea of power. Not surprisingly, the growth of Moscow paralleled the grand princes changing idea of power. Kalita left eight cities and principalities to his three sons. Ivan III left eighty seven cities and principalities, and Ivan IV left one hundred sixty two cities and principalities.

The rise of Muscovy consisted of a complex and complicated system of events. However it is clear that the changing ideas of power of the grand princes had an important function in the growth of Moscow. Ivan IV ruled over a centralized and autocratic state that allowed him to spread his dominion over all the Russian lands.

## Bibliography

- Cherniavsky, Michael. "Khan or Basileus: An Aspect of Russian Mediaeval Political Theory." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 20, No. 4. (Oct. -Dec., 1959), pp.459-479.
- Christian, David. *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*. Vol. I, *Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire*. London/Malden, Mass., 1998.
- Dewey, Horace W. "Russia's Debt to the Mongols in Suretyship and Collective Responsibility". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 30, No. 2. (April, 1988): 249-270.
- Eaton, Henry L. "Cadasters and Censuses of Muscovy". *Slavic Review*, Vol. 26, No.1. (Mach. 1967): 54-69.
- Fennell, John. *The Emergence of Moscow, 1304-1359*. Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1968
- Halperin, Charles. *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History*. Bloomington, Ind., 1985.
- Halperin, Charles J. "Russia in Then Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective". *Havard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1. (June. 1983): 239-261.
- Howes, Robert craig. "The Testaments of the Grand Princes of Moscow" Cornell University, NY, 1967.
- Keenan, Edward. "Muscovy and the Kazan: Some Introductory Remarks on the Patterns of Steppe Diplomacy." *Slavic Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4. (Dec., 1967): 548-558 .
- Michell, Roberts. "The Chronicle of Novgorod" AMS Press, NY, 1970.
- Morgan,David. *The Mongols*. Oxford, U.K., 1986.
- Ostrowski, Donald. *Muscovy and the Mongols. Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589*. Cambridge, U.K., 1998.
- Ostrowski, Donald. "The Mongol Origins of Muscovite Political Institutions". *Slavic Review*, Vol. 49, No. 4. (Winter, 1990): 525-542.
- Prince, Dyneley J. "Mongol Material in Old Russia". *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1919): 74-88.
- Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. "Oriental Desoitism and Russia". *Slavic Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4. (Dec., 1963): 644-649.

Stolberg, Eva-Maria. Review of "Die Mongolen in Asien und Europa". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 57, No.2. (May, 1998): 517-519.

Tschebotarioff-Bill, Valentine. "The Circular Frontier of Muscovy". *Russian Review*, Vol. 9, No.1. (Jan., 1950): 45-52.

Wittfogel A, Karl. "Russian and the East: A Comparison and Contrast." *Slavic Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4. (Dec., 1963): 627-643.